Chthonic

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Chthonic

by perpetuallycaffeinated

Summary

With the appearance of a killer who seems obsessed with ancient Greek myths concerning Hades, Persephone, and the underworld, reality starts to shift and tear apart at the scenes for Will Graham (and, surprisingly enough, Hannibal Lecter, though he refuses to admit it). As Will and Hannibal follow the crimes, questions of reincarnation and what's possible in the world come to a head. And, because this is NBC Hannibal, they do so in a ridiculous, bloody way.

Notes

This WILL eventually have very graphic sex AND violence, so I've gone ahead and rated this for it so no one subscribes to it when it's a lower rating and then gets an ugly surprise. Also, this takes place in Season 1 after "Sorbet" but before "Fromage."

Obol

A thick layer of clouds covered the Maryland sky, a slow but steady flurry of snow starting to cover the ground below. The weather had transformed the landscape into an endless stretch of grey, whirling flurries obscuring anything more than a few feet ahead of a FBI fleet sedan, a lonely ship on this stretch of I-95.

Inside, Will Graham pressed a palm up to the passenger door window, his body heat immediately draining out into the ice cold glass. Outside that barrier, everything was soft lines, blurred and indistinct in a way that was slowly becoming more and more familiar to him. The vehicle felt like a small fortress of stability amidst the shifting grey. He and Hannibal were making their way up to the northern corner of Maryland, to a crime scene on a small tributary off the Susquehanna river. Will was secretly grateful that Hannibal had offered to drive them both; he doubted that travelling without the doctor could come with this same sense of calm. Perhaps not even this sense of safety, with Will behind the wheel. Not when he could feel his mind flowing out into the landscape, sucked out of his skull into the hungry morning wilderness.

“--this morning..? Will...Will?”

At the sound of Hannibal’s voice, Will mentally pulled himself back into the car and turned his attention to the man beside him.

“Hm? What? Sorry, still a little tired.”

Hannibal still had his eyes on the road, and he didn’t look worried. He couldn’t have been calling for too long.

“What does Uncle Jack have in store for us this morning?” he asks, the words carefully placed as he repeated his question. “Everything was moving very quickly when we were called in this morning.”

It was true; Jack had been yelling out orders and delegating travel schedules left and right while forensic scientists and crime scene investigators scrambled to get packed and on the road. Will had been given only a basic explanation as the agent handed off a stack of case files amidst the whirlwind. Hannibal had been completely still amidst the chaos, sitting politely in a chair too far away to hear what Jack had muttered before storming off to his own sedan.

Will yawned and waved at the stack of files in his lap, trying (unsuccessfully) to tame his uncombed hair as he spoke .

“These are police reports going back about a year, the first one starting up in eastern New York. Multiple states, but each crime’s been found further south than the last.”

“Homicides?”

Will shook his head, index finger tracing along the lines of text as he read the details.

“No, livestock mutilation. The FBI’s been keeping an eye on the cases every since they started crossing state lines. Some of the local police think that it’s just a bunch of UFO chasers trying to pull off a hoax...or actual aliens,” he adds as he turns the page to a different officer’s report of the incident. “I wish I’d been in the office when Jack got the call from this sheriff.”

“But of course.” Hannibal’s voice was even, but Will caught a flash of amusement cross his face at the thought, mouth twitching up into the hint of a smile. “Agent Crawford has little patience for such flights of fancy. I imagine that a conversation with an officer who wasted his time with something like little green men would be quite a scene to witness.”

“A very, very loud scene,” Will amended, shuffling one file to the bottom of the stack only to open two more. “Whoever’s been doing this, though, I don’t think they care about aliens. At least, not when they’re doing this to the sheep...there’s no way they’re trying to make it look like aliens killed these animals.”

“Mm?”

It was just a gentle hum, but it spurred Will on easily. Loud roars from Agent Jack Crawford, polite, subtle murmurs from Doctor Hannibal Lecter; they both compelled him to pour out his thoughts but Will greatly preferred the latter’s technique.

“All the mutilations and deaths that you’d find on ufo sites, in conspiracy theories, where people are trying to blame it on something from outer space...it’s all done to resemble some form of surgery. The wounds are cut cleanly, eyes and whole organs are missing with no mess left behind. These are…” Will’s fingers still on a photo of an eviscerated ram, the gaping maw of a wound stretching the entire length of the animal’s torso. There was certainly nothing missing from this animal. All of the organs had spilled out of the animal. Disturbing, but very easy to catalogue and account for. “These are something else entirely. All the reports include that the sheep were found with burned wreaths wrapped around their head or horns. They were too burned or decomposed to identify what kind of plants were used, but they were always there. And always only two cuts to the animal, one to the neck, and one to completely gut it down its belly. They’re leaving a huge mess of blood and guts for us every time.”

There were few moments of contemplative silence as both men digested the new information, filled with quiet breaths and the careful shuffle of papers, before Hannibal asked another question.

“In what condition are the organs found, then?”

Will flipped through several of the folders, pulling photographs of different crime scenes out to compare side by side.

“...a mess, but almost all intact. They’re not left in any pattern that the local police can recognize, and it looks like they haven’t got any ideas up at the FBI, either. The liver was cut up in some of the killings, but otherwise everything was left intact.”

“Only the livers?”

A quick flip through the corresponding reports, a quick nod of his head. Hannibal tilted his head up, thoughtful as he worried at his top lip with his tongue. Will stared as the doctor turned something over in his head, but he didn’t push. Hannibal chewed information over the same way he did when he ate a meal; slowly and thoroughly to savor every possible facet.

“Signs of ceremony with the wreaths, interest in entrails and the liver...your culprits may have been attempting to find the answer to something inside those organs. Extispicy, or haruspicy, to be precise.”

Will gave a short snort of laughter, but he quickly composed himself when Hannibal shot him a reproachful look out of the corner of his eye.

“It’s certainly fallen out of favor in recent times, but the practice has a long and famous history, especially in connection to the Greeks and ancient Romans...the stabbing of Julius Caesar himself was said to have been read from the liver of a sacrificed animal. It wouldn’t be out of the realm of the possibility for our culprit to try and revive the practice.”

“You ever read something interesting in a side of beef, then? Look for the weather forecast at one of your dinner parties?”

Hannibal directed another sideways glance at Will, but he graciously overlooked his acerbic tone.

“No, although you know you are always welcome to come to a dinner party and look for yourself. Perhaps you will find something hidden in the meat that my other guests have been overlooking.”

Will’s jaw tightened at the roundabout invitation to join one of Hannibal Lecter’s famous dinner parties. He’d heard more than enough about the dining room from Alana and Jack, who had both been there on formal occasions. He couldn’t stomach the thought of being surrounded on all sides by society elites, eyes on him as he made his way through unfamiliar dishes and utensils. Hannibal may fit into the category of “society elite,” but when they ate together it was always simple meals at a table just big enough for the two of them. Will just shook his head, staring determinedly at a close-up shot of a piece of liver in his lap until Hannibal continued.

“I apologize, I didn’t mean to impose an uncomfortable request...but to answer your question, no. I don’t believe it’s possible for people to divine their future, no matter what the means. We are all responsible to make ourselves the future we want for ourselves...a life dictated by cards and tea leaves is not one I would care to live. If someone feels that they do not have a choice in their future, it is understandable that they may find comfort in the belief that they at least have the advantage of knowing what lies ahead. The ones you and Jack Crawford are chasing have just chosen a rather extreme method of regaining a sense of control.”

“So no aliens, just someone who think they can tell the future by slicing up farm animals,” Will sighed. “Jack’s going to be thrilled.”

“Will...if I may ask?”

“Yeah?”

“These cases are a very interesting intellectual exercise,” Hannibal said, “but I don’t imagine Jack Crawford would drag you along across Maryland to empathize with someone who’s simply been killing sheep...” A pause, and that same careful smile came creeping back across Hannibal’s expression.

“...Or perhaps he needs you to empathize with the sheep themselves.” The humor is clear this time as he graces Will with a rare full smile. Will can’t help but tip his head back and chuckle himself, something warm and comfortable settling in his chest at the sight of those deep laugh lines and crooked smile. Part of him wanted to bleat like a sheep, just to see if he could coax an honest belly laugh out of his travel companion, but the reality of where they’re headed cut the impulse short.

“No, no sheep this time,” he answered, releasing the last bit of laughter with a breathy sigh. It seemed selfish to enjoy this friendly, almost intimate drive to such a terrible scene, but Hannibal had yet to reprimand him for doing anything selfish. In fact, he seemed to encourage it. Will drew in another breath, taking another hit of the moment before forcing himself back to the task at hand. The most recent file was the thinnest, holding only a preliminary police report from the northeast stretch of Maryland.

“Whatever the killer thinks they’ve found in those animals, it’s caused them to escalate to human victims.”

Will was wrong. There was not just one, but two dead sheep waiting for them at the crime scene. While most of the crew was gathered around the carcasses, Will knew that wasn’t the main attraction the killer left for them (in fact, they seemed to have been entirely left out of the initial police report he’d been given). No, that lay further through the rushes and down an embankment. As soon as he got out of the sedan, Will could tell that this was no sloppy river dumpsite. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought that it was simply an elderly man in a small boat at the edge of the river. Moving closer, he slowly picked out the details that must have come to the discovering officer in a slow wave of horror: the unmistakable decay, the off-white opaque sheen of the old man’s eyes. The corpse was propped up in a standing position in its rotten dinghy with one spindly arm stretched out, palm up. Expectant.

The victim had a gaunt and unwashed body, hair and long stringy beard marking him as an unfortunate drifter that was in the wrong place at the wrong time, a choice of simple opportunity. Whatever he’d been wearing when he was killed, it was nowhere to be found now. The body wore a simple tunic, with a much longer swath of cloth elegantly draped around his hips and shoulders.

Someone more well versed in fabrics might have been able to tell what sort of cloth had been used, but the only thing that registered with Will was how it was completely drenched in blood.

Agent Crawford intercepted them halfway to the riverbank, rushing to fill Will and Hannibal in as they picked their way through high weeds and rushes.

“Will, Dr. Lecter, glad to see you made it up safely. We’ll have to send samples back to the lab to make sure, but right now it’s looking like none of that blood is from the victim. Hey! You three!”

A trio of familiar faces popped up from a clump of tall grass further down the bank. Price, Zeller, and Katz had also been called to the scene, and were currently examining the two unfortunate sheep. Even with the difficulty of working in the winter chill, the three looked far too excited to be elbows-deep in sheep guts.

“I wouldn’t bet on finding any human DNA in those robes,” Jimmy called back, pointing down to where the other two were collecting samples from the animals’ burnt wreaths. “Judging from the mess over here, odds are that the killer got Charon’s dye from the sheep.”

“Look at the state of this liver,” Katz called out, holding up the remains of what Will was willing to call ‘liver,’ based more on good faith in Beverly’s skills than any recognition on his part. “It looks like someone took a cheese grater to it. They may have mashed some internal tissue into the cloth as well. I think there’s something on the side of the boat, Will. Take a look for me when you get down there!”

The forensic crew’s banter faded to a dull chatter as Will eased himself down the embankment to get a closer look at the body. Sure enough, the great expanses of cloth were evenly soaked in blood, with bits and pieces of offal clinging to the folds.

Jimmy Price had already referred to the body as ‘Charon.’ He had a point; the man had obviously been dressed and posed like the Greek ferryman of the dead. They’d even left him in the act of asking for a toll. Whoever had positioned the body had pulled off quite an impressive balancing act. While the majority of the corpse’s weight rested on the butt of a long oar, several ropes had been fastened around its legs and torso, then anchored to the far end of the dinghy behind him. Another length spanned from one wrist to a sapling on shore to keep the arm drawn out in silent demand.

Will wrinkled his nose and tried to block out the cloying scent of decay as he stepped even closer, slow and unsteady on the half-frozen mud. Cold weather usually gave them the small grace of delayed composition at crime scenes, but there was only so much weather could do for fabric clotted with old blood and tissue.

It looked like the forensic team was right about the origin of the blood. Even from the bank Will could see a bruise pattern on the neck of the victim, clearly outlining where a killer had strangled him with their bare hands. The investigators may have even been able to spot it from their perch up in the rushes. But what was it Beverly had seen on the boat…? Will braced himself against an old stump, tilting out over the water at a precarious angle to see where she had pointed. Sure enough, two words had been carved into the wood, the work

crude but effective. Probably done with whatever large knife that had sliced up the sheep, judging by how deep and ragged the lines were; penmanship had not been a priority. There were only two words, a hastily slashed title for the picture the killer had left for them to find.

"*Passage Home*."

"You know the drill. Get comfortable and no one'll bother you till you ask us to come down."

Jack Crawford's voice was already beginning to fade as Will settled down on the stump and started to let the edges of himself blur. His eyes unfocused, vision taking on a familiar alien glow as he let a pendulum swing through his line of sight, slicing away time and details that separated his mind from the killer's.

This part is no challenge and comes easily, even with two animals to wrangle instead of one. I stand behind the ram: cut, spray, another quick move to eviscerate before moving onto the eye. Same quick movements that I've done over and over before. This is not art, not a message It's a simple task. I don't dig a pit for the blood and organs, nor do I find a place of honor for the bodies. If I thought that they once held answers that I needed, they are no longer soothsayers. Now they are just discarded corpses that I leave to rot in the tall grass. They are not my design, not anymore. These are merely my tools, my raw materials. Now it is time to paint a picture that truly matters.

The bodies of the two sheep are swept away in Graham's mind by another swing of the pendulum. They're immediately replaced by a new, human victim. This one is very much alive, and far more aware of his impending fate.

The man is old and weak, easy prey as far as humans go. While I've just killed a ram twice as strong as him with a large blade, that is not how he dies. That is not how I will him to die. I fall on him and wrap both of my hands around his frail neck. If I'm much bigger than him, I could snap his neck, but I ***squeeze*** *the life out of him. The delicate cartilage of his throat crunches and bruises under my hands. Red blossoms in the whites of his eyes. I do not receive any pleasure from his passing; in all likelihood, I do not even know the man's name. This death does not frighten me, it does not arouse me, it simply is.*

I do not cut him or crack his bones. I have always completely opened my kills, but now I leave him whole...

Why do I leave him whole?

Will bobs closer to the surface of his own awareness, mind flashing back to how the killer had left the body positioned. There was no hint of mockery or shaming, no sexualized elements. At first glance the body just looked like an old man, waiting...

Realization grabs at Will Graham like a cold hand and yanks him back into the depths of someone else's mind.

I leave him whole because his job is not yet done. His death, my killing of him, is just another part of my preparation. This man and his pain are not important to me. He will become important because of who I make him become.

The clothes I found him in are no longer right. Whoever this man was, it is not who he is anymore. I will make his new garments out of virgin white cloth. The fibers are thirsty for blood and offal, drink up the dye that I've cut from the sheep's bellies. Now I am careful, so, so careful when I dress him in the long bolt. He is Charon now, and he must be dignified. With the rope I help the ferryman stand at his post. He waits, leaning at his post and demanding a payment for his services. My Charon is waiting for someone to find him and step into his boat for the passage home. A dead man, clothed in death, waiting to be of service to the dead. A link to the land of the dead. This is my--

Ropes creak and snap. Will's golden-hued world is gone, as is the glowing pendulum in his mind. The old man is not a cadaver propped up in a parody of life, nor are his clothes dark and clotted with blood. Charon raises his head, cloudy eyes meeting his own as the blood drips fresh and bright red from the cloth.

Where's your toll?

The question rattles around Will's brain without the man's mouth moving. Before he can answer, or even register what the animated corpse is implying, Charon's reaches down, grabs Will by the arm, and yanks him to his feet. Will stumbles, feet sliding in the mud, and it's only the boatman's preternaturally strong grip that keeps him from tumbling into the river. Charon shakes him like a doll and makes his demand again, louder, harsh voice roaring inside his mind.

Will would try and escape, but it already feels like the boatman is in danger of yanking his arm out of its socket. He opens his mouth to protest, to make any noise that will call Jack or anyone else down to save him from the clutches of the boatman, but whatever words Will had in mind are immediately swallowed up as the whole of a river rushes up and out of his mouth. No, not his mouth, down past his throat, the thundering torrent making his whole body shake and reverberate with the wails and lamentations that are somehow contained within the waters.

"Will!"

At the sound of Jack shouting his name, Will's mind whiplashed back into reality just in time to realize that he had actually gotten up from the stump and was mid-fall straight into the river. One more moment of clarity to realize that Charon's attack had all been a hallucination, and then the freezing waters of the Susquehanna shocked any further thoughts into oblivion.

Will had practically been able to swim before he could walk, but his mind was still in a tangled panic, and the water's temperature had paralyzed his body. It was a miracle that he had the presence of mind to keep his mouth shut. An effort to kick his way to the surface only served to disorient himself further. He'd dressed for the weather, and now the thick and heavy layers were adding to his weight and preventing him from floating back to the surface. Will tried to reorganize his thoughts, but his mind continued to go round in circles, bouncing from his empathy, to Charon's tight grip, to the cold river water and the growing burning in his lungs.

Where was his toll? He'd need one; he was going to fucking drown at a murder scene right next to the boatman of the dead. Hysteria overcame survival instinct, and Will let out a short

bark of laughter, the sound muffled underwater as the last of his precious air poured out of his mouth in a series of bubbles.

Just as the burning in his chest grew too much to resist, Will felt two pairs of hands grab him and yank him above the surface of the water and onto dry land in an undignified heap. He sucked in great lungfuls of air, staggering on numb feet as his two rescuers stripped him of his coat and shirts.

“Will, we need to get you completely dry,” a calm voice murmured in his ears. The pair of hands checking his vitals, he hazily surmised, belonged to Dr. Lecter. Those with the towels currently rubbing his skin raw would be Jack’s, then. He could hear him yelling at the forensic crew for more towels and blankets.

Keeping his eyes squeezed shut, Will groaned in protest as his slacks were also lost in the process.

“Why do we even have towels here?” he grumbled.

“For just this sort of accident. Now tip your head forward.”

Will’s mind still hadn’t completely come back online, but it seemed Dr. Lecter’s voice had developed a shortcut through any confusion in his brain; he found himself tilting forward obediently before he’d even had the time to try and object. A broad hand molded itself against his hairline, guarding his face as Hannibal used his free hand to squeeze excess water from his curls.

Even after plunging his hands into the river after Will, Hannibal’s skin still kept the scent of his usual cologne With the amount of time they had been spending together, Will realized, it had grown familiar without Will even consciously recognizing it; Yet another thing concerning the doctor that had wormed its way into even the most well-defended parts of his mind. He leaned into the pressure of Hannibal’s hand, twisting his head slightly to press his nose closer to the delicate skin of the other man’s wrist. Yes, that was the smell of the calm car ride up to this disaster. It was also the smell that pervaded Hannibal's home and office. Will had never even registered the scent, but now that he’d identified it, he’d never be able to ignore it.

Hannibal ignored his completely unsubtle gesture until Jack was out of earshot, then ducked his head down into Will’s line of sight.

“Did you just smell me?” he asked, the concern on his face now tempered with a rare glimpse of humor. Will gave a weary smile in return, Apparently the doctor remembered that awkward moment as well as he did.

“Mm. Difficult to avoid,” he muttered, finally forcing himself to stand without leaning into Hannibal’s support. He took another deep breath to clear his nose of the scent, then wrinkled his nose as reality set in; he was drying quickly, but towels did nothing about the smell of mud and decaying algae that now clung to his hair and body. “I think you’re going to miss

my usual cologne if I get back in that car, though. I think I'll catch a ride back home with B-B-Bev--god--goddammit--"

Will's attempt at a polite exit was foiled as his entire body began to jerk and shiver, desperately trying to raise its temperature in the frigid air. Hannibal gave a small tut of disapproval, shedding his ankle-length peacoat and wrapping it around Will before he had time to protest. Will just wrapped it tighter around his shoulders, figuring that this was slightly less humiliating than shivering in the cold in his boxers and tube socks.

"Nonsense. I'll be driving you back; there's no need for you to put more undue stress on yourself right now, Will." Hannibal popped the coat's collar up, making sure Will's neck and ears were covered before motioning back towards the car.

"The keys are in my coat pocket. Take off the rest of your wet clothes once you get in and turn the heat on as high as you'd like."

Stowing his pride for a later time (preferably one when he could feel all his extremities and had pants), Will just nodded and staggered back towards their vehicle.

Once safe inside the car, just over the hill and away from prying eyes of crime scene techs, Will blasted the heat as high as it would go, still shivering violently as he kicked his shoes and socks off. He peeled his ruined boxers off with a wince of disgust. The grit and grime of the river had managed to get through his pants and into his underwear, even in the short time he'd been submerged. The offending clothing was balled up and tossed unceremoniously into the backseat.

Now that just left him in the coat. His sort-of-psychiatrist's expensive, designer peacoat. It should have been awkward, but that quick dip in the river was proving to have temporarily taken all of the fight out of him, as well as any capability for embarrassment. Will tucked his feet up under the hem of the coat, curling and contorting in the seat to try and bury himself in the fabric as much as possible. It was a pleasant surprise when it easily swallowed his form up, with room to spare. Nosing further down into the warm cocoon, Will found that he could even hide the bottom half of his face before the threat of a draft appeared. Hannibal was only a few inches taller than him. He'd need to be a man of a much thicker, bulkier build to leave Will swimming in his clothes this way. Had he ever seen Hannibal in clothes that left more than his forearms exposed? Will tried in vain to remember a time when the doctor had been in something that could even approach 'casual,' his eyelids slowly growing heavier and heavier as the heat and his own exhaustion overtook him. Hannibal always kept himself covered, didn't he? The lines of his suits were strong and unbroken, completely obscuring whatever natural shapes lay beneath the expensive fabrics. Put on an embarrassing amount of weight in his later years? No, Will scolded himself as he let his eyes shut. In the back of that ambulance, Hannibal's arms had been strong, thick and corded with muscle.

Still struggling to imagine the doctor in something other than perfectly pressed three-piece suits, he dropped his head even lower into his little ball of warmth and drifted off to sleep.

Will woke gradually, the gentle rumble of tires and gentle rocking of the car nudging him back into the world of the living. He yawned, then winced as the scent of stagnant river water hit the back of his throat. While he was grateful to feel his fingers and toes again, the heat hadn't done his scent any favors.

"Mmf...how long was I out for?" Will grumbled, sleep-addled brain taking stock of the situation. Someone, presumably Hannibal, had secured his seat belt for him, and at some point in the drive, the peacoat had slipped off his shoulders and...buttoned itself at the waist?

"Only an hour or so" Hannibal replied, stealing a quick glance over at Will. "I hope I didn't overstep any boundaries, but you'd started to flush and sweat all bundled up the way you were. I was concerned that you'd overheat."

" 's fine," Will yawned, stretching his legs out in front of him as the fuzz cleared his head. Hannibal had rearranged the coat so that it closed halfway down his stomach, keeping his modesty while leaving his shoulders and chest to cool. In truth, it was probably covering more skin than his usual choice of sleepwear.

So he'd been sweating, on top of the stench he'd dragged into the car with him? He tentatively sniffed his skin, then immediately wished that he hadn't. With the combination of old river water, mud, and sweat, he smelled like the bottom of an old boat crossed with a locker room. Still, a quick glance around the car confirmed that Hannibal hadn't let down any of the windows, letting Will's odor bake in the confines of the vehicle for the last hour. If it wasn't already settled into the upholstery by now, it certainly would be by the time they got the car back to Quantico. Jack probably wouldn't even notice. He'd probably be pulled into the man's office immediately, since he hadn't gotten to debrief him before leaving the scene. Will shifted in his seat and remembered how very, very naked under the thick wool of Hannibal's coat.

"Do you know someplace along the way where I can pick up some clothes? I can't go back into the B.S.U. like this."

"You won't," Hannibal said. "I spoke to Jack while you were waiting. You may tell me anything that Agent Crawford needs to know in the immediate future, and I will drop you off at your home, then return to Quantico by myself. As for your car," Hannibal continued, not even raising his voice as he cut off the beginnings of resistance from Will, "your associates are quite clever. I'm sure they can conceive of a way to return it to you before tomorrow morning."

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm being steamrolled?" Will answered, mouth thinning in frustration as he plucked stray hairs off of the coat.

"Perhaps because you are," the doctor hummed in agreement. "You gave Uncle Jack and me more of a scare than you realize, deciding to go for a swim in the middle of January like that."

Will couldn't tell if Hannibal's face matched the light, dismissive tone of his voice. He wasn't looking at the other man's face, too busy staring at the way his knuckles whitened around the steering wheel as Hannibal forced something down below his calm exterior. The small gesture stilled Will's knee jerk resistance to Hannibal's treatment of him (and by proxy, Jack Crawford's as well). Hannibal Lecter with anything less than complete and total control of himself disturbed something deep in the shadows of Will's mind. His eyes flicked back and forth between the doctor's hands and face, actively trying to let his empathy soak up whatever had surfaced ever so briefly, but it was too late. Hannibal's hands had relaxed, and his face gave away absolutely nothing.

"...The sheep aren't important anymore," he finally said after a long stretch of uncomfortable silence. "The fact that there's two now, that has to be important, but it isn't about them anymore. If it ever was." Will worried at his bottom lip with his teeth as he spoke, letting the connections flow out of him. "At least here, they needed what was inside them to help make the boatman. A *whole* boatman," he added, gesturing for emphasis. He wasn't just an escalation from animals to people. The sheep, the ram, they weren't important, not even in the cases before this. What was inside them, he thought that was important, but not like the boatman. He *made* the boatman. He didn't want to--to make a statement, or to shock, or show off to someone. In his mind at least, the killer needs him to do a job after they left him, Take something across the river…" From the dead to the living, or from the living to the dead? Will's mind tried to find the answer amongst all the details he remembered from the crime scenes, but fell short, clawing at empty air. "I--I don't know what direction the boatman's going yet, but something's crossing, and he thinks it's going *home*." Wi''s voice broke slightly, the memory of how the old man had reached for him surfacing unbidden. He gritted his teeth and scrubbed at his face in an attempt to banish him to the back of his mind. Was it the killer who saw the boatman like that, or had it been his own hallucination? Was there even a meaningful line between the two any more?

"Does the killer believe that his Charon has completed his task?"

Will's grimace twisted into a manic grin at the question. He dug the heels of his hands harder into his eyes, visualizing the one spindly arm, hand empty as it stretched, questing, open palm extended and bare.

"No, no, he's not done. He left him at the river's edge, waiting to be paid….and writing 'passage home' on the side? It was big enough to be read from up on the hill. The boatman didn't need it; neither did the killer. Why write something down that's obvious to you, if it's for you?" That, at least, was a fact that Will could feel firmly locking into place in his mind. There were still too many holes, too many things that needed hours and hours with crime scene photographs and reports, but he knew at least that much. Whoever the killer imagined that this boat ride was for, it wasn't for himself. "I think that whatever signs he was looking for in the organs before, he's found it. He'll kill again, but he won't be moving south anymore. When he does kill, it'll probably be soon, and close by. Maybe into Virginia, but not too far down," he added, remembering how close to the coastline the scene had been. "That river empties into the Chesapeake. If the body of water is important, maybe that will make their comfort zone larger,"

Hannibal nodded, listening to the torrent of words without another interruption. Once Will fell quiet, though, his next question was asked with utmost care, syllables tiptoeing around cracks in the ice.

“What did you see that sent you tumbling into the river, Will? Did Garrett Jacob Hobbs take the place of another victim?”

“Hobbs *was not* my victim!” Will snapped, whipping forward, only to be immediately choked and forced back down by his seat belt. Struggling only caused the safety device to tighten even further. Will took a deep breath and forced himself to be still.

“I...I didn’t see Hobbs. I saw the victim reanimated, but not alive. He was still the corpse we found at the scene, just...moving. Speaking. He reached for me and tried to grab me, but then all this water came up from my mouth and--”

Will interrupted himself with a frustrated sigh, wiggling slightly to test the seat belt's stranglehold on him.

“It all just sounds like an ordinary bad dream when I say it out loud.”

“I doubt that any of your dreams are ordinary,” Hannibal soothed. Will decided to take the remark as one of the doctor’s many odd compliments.

“How much do you know about Greek myths surrounding the afterlife, Will?”

“Just the basics they teach you in public school here,” Will replied, pushing against his restraints once more before going limp with defeat. “Persephone, Hades, the river Styx. Wouldn’t be surprised if I’ve forgotten the majority of it.” Will shot a guarded look at Hannibal from the corner of his eye, recalling the rows upon rows of books on display in the other man’s office. “I take it you know quite a bit more.”

“I’m familiar with some books on the subject,” Hannibal acknowledged, delicately side-stepping the gaping class difference between them. “Speaking of which, I must insist that we stop by my office on our way back to your house. I have several volumes that might prove helpful to your search. You know,” he added, “in ancient Greece, the afterlife was not seen as superior to the world of the living. There were special places invented for reward and punishment, but the vast majority of souls were condemned to a grey, misty plain for all eternity.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of afterlife I’d kill for,”

“Nor I,” Hannibal agreed. “Our murderer is familiar with the ancient Greek mythos surrounding death, which makes his affection for it that much harder to discern.”

“...Passage home…” Will murmured, skimming his fingertips over where the boatman had grabbed him. He swallowed thickly as the ghost of the deluge bubbled up in his chest. “Charon’s still at his post, and we didn’t find any evidence of a suicide. This kill wasn’t about the killer trying to reach the underworld. This one, probably any others that we find after this,

at least in his mind, are going to be about something external. Something or someone else. They might even be trying to help someone. I just have no idea who."

"All the more reason to borrow some of my books," Hannibal said. "You have this rare gift, Will, but it can't do everything for you. You will need as much knowledge of the myths as our killer does to help you fill in the cracks."

Kore

Chapter Summary

Reality begins to crack around Will Graham first.

Chapter Notes

A bit of a short chapter, but very important for where it's going. Also wrote the majority of it in Hannibal's POV for a change.

True to his word, Hannibal insisted on a short stop at his house. Will barely had time to grumble an objection as the other man slipped into his home, reappearing after only a few minutes with a large stack of books and papers. Any further discussion of the killer and his motives were paused as Will spent the rest of the drive home with his nose in the books. It may have grated on his nerves to acknowledge his lack of expertise in this area, but he would be damned if he wasn't going to get into this killers head.

Will fell asleep that night surrounded by books, the writings of both ancient and modern scholars fanned out around him in messy arcs. Every one bristled with post-it notes and scraps of paper. It was an uncomfortable nest to sleep in, but the usual nightmares of the day's murder did not come. Instead, Will's head was swimming in an altogether different type of dream.

There are no paths here. Just the unforgiving frozen earth beneath his bare feet and an impenetrable shroud of fog. It appears to be illuminated by dim winter sun, but when Will looks up there is no sky, no sun or clouds, not even stars. Only more of the unending fog. He tries a few yards in each direction, but finds no way to orient himself. A blank sky above him, and a blank earth underneath his feet. Not even a single blade of grass to function as a landmark. He closes his eyes and holds his breath, straining to hear anything that could give him something to walk towards.

At first there is only the sound of his own breath. Then…

Oh. ***That.***

Even here, Will cannot forget the sound of the river that poured itself out of his throat. It's in the distance, barely audible, but unmistakable. Back on the Susquehanna it had all but consumed him, shaking his body like a human tuning fork. Now he knows the key the river sings in, and he all but thrums in place. Drawn to it. Eyes still closed, will takes a step forward in the direction of the river. Then another. After the third step any hesitation melts away and he is making slow but sure progress in a straight line. He does not walk against his will. The river is simply where he must go. Where he is now is a nowhere, and all the guides are long dead. Only the river remains to point the way.

He walks for forever, but still the river roars in the distance. The ground is no longer cold under him as he walks. It isn't warmer; he has joined it in its winter state. Impenetrable and devoid of warmth. Will knows now that he is dead, but he has been dead before, and knows it is nothing of permanence. Nothing to fear. Not anymore.

The first hint of a breeze pushes past him. The river must be close now. Will tilts his head back and notices, as the wind whips his curls into disarray, the absence of a familiar weight on his head. Something so long present that he can still the phantom pressure, as if even it can't bear to be lost. It will, Will knows, be returned to him once he reaches the river. Everything that is his by right shall be returned, including his--

A sharp bark cut through the air and snapped Will out of his trance. Weeks of unwilling experience told him that he'd been sleepwalking yet again. Another bark, and the last bit of hazy confusion slipped away as reality slammed back into place. The feeling of numbness in his dream hadn't been an illusion. He was out in the night air in nothing but his boxers and an undershirt, and his extremities were cold to the point of losing sensation. How long had he walked? His legs had taken him someplace he'd never seen before, onto the shoulder of a back country road. Directly in front of him lay the mouth of a small cave.

The source of the sound was Winston. Even in his panic he felt a surge of affection; of course it was Winston. His new adoptee never left him alone on his nighttime wanderings. However, tonight he wasn't alone. The rescue was curled up at the edge of the cave with two of Will's other dogs. Piled together for warmth, in the poor light they almost appeared to be one beast, all three of its heads perked up and gazing curiously up at Will.

With a short whistle and slap on the thigh, the animals obediently disentangled themselves from the dogpile and crowded around Will's feet. Winston sniffed at his toes and whined before sitting down directly on them. Even that small bit of warmth was a relief, though Will hissed a curse at the pain that accompanied returning blood flow. He tucked his hands under his armpits to try and help the process along as he looked up and down the road, trying in vain to find any landmarks. All he could see was the faint promise of a mile marker. It was useless unless he knew what road he was on in the first place. Even more useless, he realized, since he wasn't exactly in the habit of bringing a phone with him on his midnight walks.

He couldn't just stay put and wait for a car either. Will had no idea of how late it was, but the road looked all but abandoned. No one would be travelling the scenic route at night, and even if they were, they sure as hell weren't going to give a dirty hitchhiker and his three dogs a ride.

Luckily Will lived out on the edge of wilderness. He wasn't a hunter, but he knew enough to track an animal's path. The winter ground should have only left hints of his steps. What he found instead was a comically well-defined trail of footprints trailing along behind him. Each print was sunken into the ground, slightly deformed as if he'd been walking in spring mud. Will toed at the freshest print, only to find it just as cold and frost-riddled as the rest of the ground around it. Whatever preternatural heat that had caused it was long gone…

A shiver ran through Will's body and he immediately let the mystery drop. Whatever the explanation, it could wait until he was no longer in danger of frostbite. He started back the way he'd come, three guards trotting at his heels.

Hannibal's phone rang on his bedside table. The doctor was wide awake before the first ring was through, eyeing the unknown number that demanded his attention in the early hours of the morning. He'd been having a most curious dream. Save for the occasional nightmare, Hannibal's iron clad control extended into the experience of lucid dreams. However, there had been no controlling the images in his mind's eye tonight. He tried to pull the memories into order for later examination, but what had been solid in sleep was quickly dissolving into mist, sliding away with faint echoes of the glint of metal and the consuming roar of a river.

He stared at the strange number on his phone and briefly considered letting it ring through. Thought better of it and answered. This was his carefully guarded private line. The chances of this being an emergency was simply too great.

"Hello? Who's calling at this hour?"

"Hannibal?" It was Will. Behind his voice Lecter could make out the busy sounds of a kitchen and the hiss of a deep fryer. He frowned to himself and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. It was three o'clock in the morning and Will was in some sort of restaurant. Something was amiss.

"Will? Where are you? Is everything alright?"

"I--I don't know. Probably not. Look, they barely let me in and they only let me use the phone after I promised that we'd buy something--"

On the other end of the call, the phone was yanked away from Will and was replaced by a stranger's voice.

"Are you coming to pick up your weird friend or not?" It was the voice of a little man with a little power. A scrap that he was eagerly clinging to at the moment. "And you better bring cash. This guy's in here in his goddamn underpants, doesn't even have any money for anything. He's scaring the other customers!"

You should be scared. Hannibal's frown of worry became one of annoyance.

"I sincerely apologize for my friend's state," he said smoothly. "If you would be so kind as to give me the address…?"

Hannibal jotted down the information, all the while imagining what the man's voice would sound like if he were to be shown his own intestines.

"Yes, I have it now. Thank you."

He slipped into a pair of plain black slacks and the first collared shirt within grasp, ignoring the undignified state of his hair. William was bare and exposed in what seemed to be the worst of petty humanity, and Hannibal found himself filling the part of the eager rescuer.

Even the eager rescuer could have his patience sorely tried. Hannibal stared balefully up at the pair of golden arches that loomed over his destination. Of all the places Will could choose to call for help from. He could already picture Bedelia hiding a small smile in her wine glass when she heard about this. Still, he had been through much, much worse, and this was the toll to pay if he was to retrieve his patient (friend, hope, something unknowable.) His prize was sitting on the curb, bare limbs woven into a tangle of furry bodies in a miserable attempt to stave off the cold.

"When I spoke to you I was under the impression that you were inside, at the very least."

Hannibal gave Will's body a once over as he knelt down next to the other man. There was dirt and grime streaked all over him, plain for all to see in the restaurant's unforgiving floodlights. Will turned to meet Hannibal's gaze.

"They wouldn't let me stay after I called," he explained with a weak grin. "No shoes, no shirt, no service. Turns out that if you don't have pants either they barely even let you in without calling the cops."

"A small blessing that they have not, then."

For the manager.

Will's expression turned pained then, and his gaze wavered.

"They still might if we don't get anything after I used the phone. I can pay you back when I get back to my house."

"I won't hear of it," Hannibal replied as he got up. "You can talk to me freely back in the car, once this is all taken care of. Consider that as your payment if you must."

"I'd rather just pay you back than have a therapy session right now." Will groaned and hid his face in his dog's thick fur.

"Don't think of me as your therapist at this hour, Will."

"What are you then?"

“A concerned friend.”

Hannibal could feel Will’s stare on the back of his neck as he turned and strode into the restaurant.

The smells inside the building were an assault on his senses. Any lingering hints of Will’s presence were drowned out by dirty oil, fat, and the stench of unhappy humans. A part of Hannibal entertained the fantasy of just burying his nose in Will’s neck and letting the clean smell of dirt and honest sweat purge this place. It was silenced.

Hannibal was instantly singled out by the manager. He must have been spotted speaking with Will outside.

“You! You’re that guy’s friend,” a familiar voice spat. The man appeared to be all of the place’s offensive odors made flesh, and Hannibal was quietly grateful that he had already decided not to consume him after all. “What took you so long? What the hell is wrong with that guy, anyway? Friggin crazy I think, trying to come in here the way he looks.”

Hannibal continued to look serene and nonthreatening. .

“So what’re you gonna order? He told you right? You’ve got to be a paying customer to use the phone or I will call the cops. Should anyway, with a dangerous man like that roaming the streets.”

The smaller man raised his chin and puffed up his chest in an effort to match Lecter’s height. His face would be better off plunged in the deep fryer until all the meat had fallen off to feed the rats. The thought calmed Hannibal.

“What troubles my friend is, of course, a private matter. I will have...a ‘number one,’” he replied, choosing the first menu item his gaze fell on.

“Soda?”

“Water.”

The food was prepared in a matter of minutes, a sure sign of poor quality. However, it was not fast enough when he knew Will was still waiting for him outside. Hannibal would have preferred to just abandon the order altogether, but Will was exhausted. He would actually need the water to rehydrate on the long drive.

Once he had the food, Hannibal wasted no more time on pleasantries. He practically stalked back outside, dour expression a sharp contrast to the front door’s cheerful chime signalling his exit.

“This is extremely low quality food, Will,” he objected, but offered both the food and the water. Will took them with a nod and buried his nose in the cheap paper bag.

“I know. Pretty much everyone knows, but it still smells so good right now. Not everyone has your nose.”

“Unfortunately,” Hannibal sighed and led the way to the Bentley. Will and his furry entourage poured into the backseat. Even with the saving grace of blankets spread out to catch the fur, Hannibal saw a thorough cleaning in the car’s immediate future. Will tore open the bag, but he stopped himself short before pulling the food free.

“Is it okay to eat in here?”

“Of course, by all means eat it now. You seem to have had quite the trying night,” Hannibal said with a wave of his hand. After all, better for the smell to linger in his car than invade his home. Will tore into his cheeseburger, and Hannibal took solace in the fact that the man still had an appetite after tonight’s ordeal. He would have to eat a more nutritious meal in the morning, of course. He couldn’t help but picture will left alone to his own devices in Wolf Trap, Breakfast would stink of stale sweat and be composed of cheap coffee and toast. If, of course, Will had the energy left to prepare anything at all. Wordlessly, Hannibal took the road that would take them back north to Baltimore. He would not leave Will Graham in the wilderness tonight.

Will was silent as he ate, the only sound from the backseat the rustle of grease slicked paper. Hannibal assumed that man was well on his way to sleep when he finally spoke.

“You were the only one I could call.”

Something greedy snaked its way through Hannibal’s ribs.

Years of therapy sessions had taught him the value of remaining silent. Sure enough, when it became clear that his companion was not going to press the issue, more and more words spilled out from Will as if they were eager to fill the vacuum.

“I just...I mean look at me,” Will continued. “After making an ass of myself at the river, what am I going to do, call Jack or the others and let them know that I slipped up again--what is this, less than twenty-four hours later?” A short, bitter laugh from the backseat. “The manager back there was right to want to call the police. I look crazy. I feel crazy, sometimes.”

“It may help you to recount the experience out loud,” Hannibal finally suggested.

“Not much to recount,” Will replied. “I was dreaming and then I woke up on the side of a road I’ve never seen before.”

“What did you dream?”

Hannibal saw a hand come up in the rear view mirror to stroke that the top of Will’s nest of curls.

“It wasn’t a nightmare like the other times. At least I don’t think it was, I wasn’t scared. I was walking, so that’s the same. But I was…”

Another taut length of silence. “I was nowhere, and I was walking towards a river that I couldn’t see, far off in the distance.”

The memory of rushing water flitted through the back of Hannibal's head.

"It makes sense for you to dream of water after the incident at the Susquehanna, wouldn't you say?"

The hand in Will's hair tightened, pulling until it must have been painful for the man.

"I guess. It seemed familiar...all I knew was that I had to make it to the river to get everything back."

"What had you lost?"

"I don't know." Will's voice had a strange lilt to it that suggested that his mind's eye was far away from the conversation at hand. The greedy thing in Hannibal ached to peel back the skin and bone to delve into that brain. "I don't know, but I know that what I'd lost was mine."

"And how did that make you feel?"

Will snorted at the hack question, but Hannibal got his answer.

"I felt...angry. Selfish."

"Feeling selfish can be a very healthy experience. Especially for those who live their lives burning pieces of themselves to light other's paths."

Hannibal knew he was pushing. If they had been in his office, now would be when Will fortified himself in the chair opposite the psychiatrist and fixed him with a hostile stare. Now the man in the back had to raise his head to meet Hannibal's gaze in the rear view mirror.

"I don't burn pieces of myself."

Hannibal stared right back for a moment before turning his eyes back to the road.

"Maybe not exactly, but what you do, who you make yourself be, involves regularly sublimating your own self and needs in favor of those of others. You must not fear selfish desires, Will."

Another derisive snort.

"Whose opinion is that, the friend or the psychiatrist?"

"they are both of one mind on the subject," Hannibal replied. Behind him, Will slumped down further into the blankets.

"You know, I can sleepwalk out of your house just as easily as mine."

So he had noticed.

"You don't know the layout of my house well enough," Hannibal pointed out. "And I am also an extremely light sleeper. I would notice your activity before you were able to find the front

door."

That seemed to mollify Will. After passing another long stretch of road in silence, Hannibal found that it was his turn to feel compelled to speak.

"You may take my bed, of course. You are my guest." Only more silence greeted him. "William?"

A slight adjustment to the rear mirror gave Hannibal a view of the backseat, where Will Graham had drifted off to a peaceful sleep.

By the time they reached Hannibal's home, it was nearly five o'clock in the morning. Despite his insistence that Will go straight to bed, the man insisted on summoning the energy to not only prepare a space in the mudroom for the dogs that had come with him, but also borrow Hannibal's cell phone to leave a message with one of his neighbors about looking after the rest. It took Hannibal's sheer force of will to even get him to agree to sleep on Hannibal's bed rather than the couch.

"If I lie on the couch, I will be in a much better position to guard the door," Hannibal reminded a freshly-scrubbed Will. The other man gave one last grunt of protest, but laid back onto the bed.

"You should have at least let me keep my own clothes. These don't fit me."

"You are the one invited to use my bed, not your dirty nightclothes."

Will was right, though. As Hannibal's coat had illustrated earlier back by the river, Will was the more slender of the two men, and for the second time in as many days found himself swimming in Hannibal's clothing. The silk pajamas covered far more skin than his own threadbare shirt and boxers, but somehow made him look equally exposed. The collar dipped lower on Will than intended, baring the strong curve of his clavicles to the air. Hannibal found it quite endearing.

"And it's practically morning," Will tried again, not even acknowledging Hannibal's point. "I don't even think I can get back to sleep."

"Would you prefer I spoke with you for a while? It seemed to calm your mind on the way here."

Will didn't answer, but he turned onto his side to face the other man and looked up expectantly. Very well. Truthfully, Hannibal had already been creating a hypothesis about what troubled Will on the drive home. Perhaps it was better to pursue it now than risk that the other man would prefer to ignore the incident later. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"On the way back to Virginia yesterday, I loaned you quite a few books and papers from my private collection. Did you happen to read any of them before retiring for the night?"

“Almost all of them,” Will admitted.

“Did anything in particular stand out to you?”

Will appeared to turn the question over in his mind for some time, tracing an aimless pattern on the pillow as his muscles started to relax.

“One of the gods, I guess. I’d only heard the one story about Persephone before, but there was so much more involving her with the death rites and myths. It just didn’t fit with what I’d known about her.”

“Persephone is usually only known for how Hades took her as his bride,” Hannibal conceded. “As the poor girl wrenched from the fields. One has to actively look for her in more specialized literature to find much else of value. Even in Ancient Greece, I imagine it would have been the more of the same. Hers was not a name freely spoken.”

“They feared her,” Will murmured. Hannibal allowed himself a small smile.

“Yes. She was not only a goddess who represented returning life, but also death and the dark places. Persephone may have been a minor harvest deity in the beginning of her story, but she became even more fearsome than her husband. There was great power in the darkness for her.” He paused, tilting his head slightly as he looked down at Will.

“Do you sense a kindred spirit in the maiden who was drawn down into dark places?”

Will laughed and flopped on his back.

“You know, I don’t really think I’m goddess material, do you?”

Still smiling, Will’s eyes finally slid shut. It was remarkable, really, that speaking with Hannibal calmed him so. Hannibal would have very much liked to continue the conversation as an experiment to see whether it was his own speech or Hannibal’s that relaxed him. However, the other man’s breath had already evened out into the unmistakable rhythm of sleep. Will had suffered enough, and needed sleep; this was Hannibal’s cue to exit and prepare his own bed on the couch.

Hannibal did not leave. One of his hands left the bed and reached out towards Will’s face, the strong turn of his cheek and jaw. Hannibal resolutely did not touch. The warmth of Will’s skin rose up and heated his palm. Mocked him.

“Hades took a rough hewn goddess from her wild fields and made her a queen,” he murmured. “She was dragged into the land of the dead, but there she found a throne. A little strife to become such a fierce and powerful thing..."

If Hannibal did see the complex figure of Persephone within Will Graham’s situation, he resolutely did not consider where he fell within the story. The answer was already there if he

wanted it, and he did not.

Hannibal did not leave the room for a very long time.

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